

The American Sound

A Journal of Republican Ideas

“Now we hear again the echoes of our past: a general falls to his knees in the hard snow of Valley Forge; a lonely president paces the darkened halls, and ponders his struggle to preserve the Union; the men of the Alamo call out encouragement to each other; a settler pushes west and sings a song and the song echoes out forever and fills the unknowing air.

“It is the American sound. It is hopeful, big-hearted, idealistic, daring, decent, and fair. That’s our heritage; that is our song. We sing it still. For all our problems, our differences, we are together as of old, as we raise our voices to the God who is the Author of this most tender music. And may He continue to hold us close as we fill the world with our sound – sound in unity, affection, and love – one people under God, dedicated to the dream of freedom that He has placed in the human heart, called upon now to pass that dream on to a waiting and hopeful world.”

— President Ronald Reagan
January 21, 1985

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CONTENTS

The Moral Habits of a Nation Page 3
Reps. John Boehner and James Talent

Knocking Down the Barriers to Adoption Page 5
Rep. Dave Camp

Fighting the War on Drugs Page 10
Rep. Rob Portman

The Moral Obligation of Legislators Page 16
Rep. Tom Coburn

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THE MORAL HABITS OF A NATION

By Reps. John Boehner and James Talent

In the quote that gives this journal its name, President Reagan describes the “American Sound” as “hopeful, big-hearted, idealistic, daring, decent, and fair.” What he was describing was, and is, the very soul of America.

Part of America’s distinctiveness lies in the standards that define what it means to be an American. A nation is more than just a gigantic apartment complex, whose residents have only geographical proximity in common. Edmund Burke called the defining characteristics of a nation its “prejudices” – the moral values by which people go about their life and work. These values become so ingrained in the popular conscience that for most they become habits, as routine as the rising and setting of the sun.

The moral habits of America are drawn from the Judeo-Christian ethic. They form the basis of our social institutions and represent the accumulated wisdom of generations upon generations of cultural experience. Of course, no nation can always live up to its standards, any more than a person can, but that doesn’t make the standards any less real or relevant. In America, we want our young people to wait until they are married before they have children. We accept responsibility for our own actions, cherish the truth, and are tolerant of different manners and customs. We believe in the existence and value of the human soul. We help those in need. We respect life,

freedom and property. We believe in opportunity for all and judge others by their conduct and merit, not their skin color, social standing or family background.

The government does not create these moral standards and should not be primarily responsible for enforcing them. But laws should reflect the values of society, and the government should never make it hard for honest people to lead decent lives.

The end of 1997 will mark three years of Republican control of Congress. One of our most important objectives has been to make the federal government reflect and respect traditional American values and live up to our nation’s creed. From farm policy to welfare reform to criminal justice, the Republican Congress has worked to revamp our laws so that they once again reflect our moral habits.

In farm policy, the shift was away from a policy of government control to one of greater freedom and opportunity. In welfare policy, the Republican Congress changed a system that discouraged work and marriage into one that requires work, stresses personal responsibility and recognizes the contributions of faith-based charities. In criminal justice, we have held criminals responsible for their crimes against society, changing the policies that treated criminals as victims.

Another area Republicans have worked hard to

reform is the adoption system. Based on our fundamental belief that every child in America deserves to grow up in a stable, permanent and loving home, Republicans are systematically eliminating obstacles to adoption.

In 1996, Congress passed an important adoption reform bill, much of which was originally part of the *Contract with America*. The two key components were a \$5,000 tax credit designed to help families deal with the monetary costs of adoption and important policy changes ending administrative barriers to interracial adoption.

This year, the Republican Congress continued to streamline the adoption process. In the following pages, Rep. Dave Camp discusses the important reforms Congress passed this year to overhaul the foster care and adoption systems.

As he notes:

“The way we raise our children speaks volumes about the type of society we are, and the type we want to preserve for future generations. A strained foster care system that bounces young children between multiple foster homes is teaching kids that they are unloved and unwanted. The consequences for perpetuating this type of care will be enormous.”

While it is important to make sure that federal policies reflect the values of the nation, it is also true that the answer to every problem doesn't necessarily lie in Washington, D.C. This too is an American

standard, one the Founding Fathers recognized when they constructed a federal government with limited powers. But limiting the power of the federal government doesn't mean that national leaders have no role to play in facilitating local solutions.

A fine example of someone putting this principle into practice is Rep. Rob Portman. Fueled partly by the tragic death of a teenager in his district, Rep. Portman has helped organize an impressive anti-drug coalition, pooling together civic groups, churches, police organizations, the media and others.

Recognizing that his role as a Member of Congress casts him as more than a legislator, Rep. Portman actively pursues a platform as a community leader. His article in this issue outlines his approach and details some of the activities and actions of the coalition.

The final article in this issue is an essay by Rep. Tom Coburn discussing the moral obligation of legislators. Drawing from historical events and his experiences as a physician, Rep. Coburn outlines a political philosophy based on principle, not politics. He observes that “Congress has lost the confidence of the public, and it is our duty to do what we can to win it back.” His plan to accomplish this goal calls on Members of Congress to constantly work to “do the right thing for the country,” regardless of the political ramifications.

Values such as freedom, responsibility, faith and opportunity are the foundational rock upon which this great nation was built. Writing laws and policies that strengthen and rely on these values, and acting in a manner that holds these values dear, is the ongoing goal of the Republican Congress.

KNOCKING DOWN THE BARRIERS TO ADOPTION

By Rep. Dave Camp

“Every child in America deserves a family and a home filled with love and security, free from abuse or neglect or the threat of violence. The sad truth is that today many children do not enjoy that basic human right, and I am afraid it is these very children who are paying a very dear price, victimized by a foster care system that was enacted with the best of intentions but which is failing to look out for their best interests.”

— Rep. Deborah Pryce, April 30, 1997

Today, in America, nearly half a million children languish in foster care, waiting for a permanent, loving home. Half a million children — that’s the equivalent of the entire population of Denver, Colorado. This should not, and need not, be the case. All too typical is the story of Jonathan, David, Clifford and their would-be adoptive parents.

Jonathan, David and Clifford were Michigan toddlers who suffered years of abuse while living with their mother, Jane (not her real name). In 1992, Jane abruptly abandoned the children. While the abuse had finally stopped, the children’s harrowing journey through foster care had just begun.

Following their abandonment, Jonathan, David and Clifford were placed in the loving care of Jim and Pam Williams. As time passed, the young children’s memory of their abusive mother began to fade, and they became less withdrawn. Jim and Pam decided to begin the process of adoption.

But in 1993, Jane reappeared. At taxpayer expense she was flown to Michigan from out of state, driven from the airport in a limousine, and put up in

a hotel. All of this was done by the state in an effort to reunify her with the three children she had earlier abandoned. This process was repeated several times in the course of the ensuing year. As part of the effort to make these reunification efforts succeed, the children were abruptly separated from Jim and Pam Williams — the people who had cared for and loved them.

After a year, however, the reunification efforts failed and Jane once again disappeared from the children’s lives. Only after these emotional disruptions were the Williams reunited with the children and allowed to begin the final stages of the adoption process.

The Williams family and their foster children were victims of a system that has caused tremendous emotional trauma for families and regularly places thousands of children at risk. It is a single-minded system determined to return children to their biological parents, even when a parent obviously threatens a child’s health and safety. And while loving and nurturing families like the Williams wait on the side-

Adoption and Foster Care Facts

- There are an estimated 494,000 children in foster care. That's an increase of 89 percent since 1982.
- There is a backlog of at least 100,000 children waiting to be adopted.
- More than two-thirds of children in foster care wait two years or more for adoptive placement.
- During the past 15 years, adoptions out of the foster care system have been stable, with approximately 20,000 children being adopted each year. Yet, as a total percentage of the foster care caseload, adoption has decreased.

lines, thousands of children remain in a foster care system that often fails to have kids' health and safety foremost in mind.

It runs contrary to common sense that our child welfare system places such an overwhelming emphasis on returning a child to an abusive parent, but little-known laws stand in the way of allowing other alternatives—such as adoption—to prevail.

As noted earlier, there are currently one-half million foster children waiting for permanent, adoptive homes. Yet, in the United States this year, only 27,000 children will find permanent homes.

The Republican Congress has taken important steps to increase the number of adoptions. In 1996, we passed into law a tax credit for adoptive families. Part of the *Contract with America*, this bill was specifically designed to help adoptive parents offset the costs associated with adoption. This bill also included several additional reforms, including provisions removing barriers to interracial adoptions.

This year, Congress has passed legislation to fundamentally overhaul the current adoption and foster care system. Under the new law (The Adoption Pro-

motion Act of 1997), a greater focus will be placed specifically on the welfare of children. Placing children into stable and loving families is the driving principle of this new law.

BARRIERS TO ADOPTION

The need for the reforms made this year is readily seen by examining the numerous barriers to permanent adoption. Chief among these is the “reasonable efforts” regulations included as part of the 1980 Child Welfare Act. Understanding the reasonable efforts principle is important to grasping why children spend so much time in foster care while thousands of adoptive families wait in the wings.

The reasonable efforts standard dictates that state agencies must make “reasonable efforts” to reunify a child with his or her biological parents, even when abuse or neglect has occurred. This most often means that a child will enter foster care while parents undergo counseling for emotional problems, or for drug and alcohol abuse. The goal is to make parents fit to take back their children.

Unfortunately, determining when this standard has been met, and it is thus in the best interest of the child to be moved into a permanently adopted home, is difficult. The result is too many children stuck in limbo, shuttling between different foster care families and their biological parent(s).

There is no doubt that the reasonable efforts principle is well-intentioned. Whenever possible, families should be kept together. But when a child has

Yet, in a 1991 U.S. Inspector General's report on adoption, 75 percent of state child welfare workers said it was impossible to tell when "reasonable" reunification efforts had been undertaken to an appropriate extent.

been abandoned, tortured, severely abused physically or sexually, or has suffered the death of a sibling, returning a child to the biological parents can pose a direct threat. Recognizing when that point has been reached is the key to reforming the adoption process.

Yet, in a 1991 U.S. Inspector General's report on adoption, 75 percent of state child welfare workers said it was impossible to tell when "reasonable" reunification efforts had been undertaken to an appropriate extent — the point at which they would be accepted by a judge, who still has the final say in child custody decisions. The ensuing results are cases like the one involving Jonathan, David, Clifford and Jim and Pam Williams.

In addition to the problems associated with the reasonable efforts standard, there are also other sig-

nificant barriers to adoption. The Inspector General found that courts are a source of considerable delay, often because lawyers are reluctant to take on adoption cases. Staff attitudes were also found to play a significant role. Many child welfare agency workers believe that keeping a child in foster care does not disadvantage the child, despite evidence that children are moved to multiple foster homes while in the system. In California, for instance, a third of infants remaining in care for two years had three or more placements during that time. For older children multiple placements were common.

KIDS IN FOSTER CARE ON THE RISE

The American Public Welfare Association estimates that there are currently 494,000 children in foster care, up 89 percent since 1982. Pinpointing specific causes for the increase is difficult. Statistical evidence, however, points to the growing number of child neglect cases — up from 1.5 million in 1982 to more than 3 million in 1995.

Drug and alcohol abuse is a significant factor as well. The number of children entering foster care to escape parents with drug and alcohol problems is on the rise. In 1991, the year of the most recent government study, it was estimated that 78 percent of young foster children had been exposed to drugs and alcohol before birth, up from about 25 percent in 1986. In both years, cocaine was the most prevalent substance that young foster children were exposed to, increasing from 17 percent in 1986 to 55 percent in 1991.

During a House Ways and Means Committee hearing, experts testified to the effect of substance abuse on the adoption and foster care systems. According to Jane Ross, social issues director at the

Government Accounting Office, each year nearly 1 million children in America are the victims of abuse and neglect by parents in which substance abuse is a contributing factor. She told the Committee there is considerable literature suggesting that parental substance abuse is involved in a majority of foster care cases in some locations.

Child welfare experts agree that substance abuse is placing an enormous strain on the foster care and adoption systems, due (once again) to efforts required by law to reunify foster care children with their biological parents. Many children languish in foster care while parents undergo lengthy drug rehabilitation, which carries no guarantee of turning drug users into good parents.

“Emphasizing the rigid pursuit of ‘family preservation’ [has] been a disaster,” said committee witness Dr. Mitchell B. Pearlstein, president of the Center of the American Experiment, a Minnesota-based think tank. “Almost 2,000 infants and young children in the United States die from neglect and abuse by their own parents and caregivers every year...I’m convinced more than ever that we must fundamentally re-orient the child-protection system in favor of vulnerable children.”

SOLVING THE ADOPTION DILEMMA

Passed by the House and Senate with overwhelming bipartisan support, and signed by the President, the Adoption Promotion Act streamlines the adoption process. It sets clear guidelines for cases when a child’s life or health may be endangered by return to abusive parents. It speeds up the court process, and provides incentives to states for increasing the number of children placed into adoptive homes. Specifically, the new law will:

- ◆ Require states to more aggressively pursue adoption efforts when a child has been abandoned, tortured, severely abused, sexually abused, or had a sibling murdered by a parent.
- ◆ Require states to initiate a termination of parental rights hearing if a child is in foster care 15 of the last 22 months and the foster parent is not a relative.
- ◆ Speed up the adoption hearing process from

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18 months to 12 months, shortening the amount of time a child spends in foster care.

- ◆ Provide assistance and incentives to states that move children into permanent homes.

The bill shifts the system’s focus back where it belongs: with children. Because the number of children in foster care at infancy is so high, it is all the more crucial that reform efforts concentrate on finding stable homes for foster care children. Recent studies illustrate what common sense has told parents for years: that a child’s most important period of physical, mental and emotional development occurs before the age of three.

The future of our country is in our children’s hands. The way we raise our children speaks vol-

umes about the type of society we are, and the type we want to preserve for future generations. A strained foster care system that bounces young children between multiple foster homes is teaching kids that they are unloved and unwanted. The consequences for

perpetuating this type of care will be enormous. There is no better place for a child to grow up than in a stable, safe and loving home. By reforming the adoption and foster care systems, we're giving a half-million children a fighting chance at a bright future.

First elected to the House in 1990, Rep. Dave Camp of Michigan is a member of the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Human Resources. He, along with Rep. Barbara Kennelly (D-CT), is the co-author of The Adoption Promotion Act.

FIGHTING THE WAR ON DRUGS

By Rep. Rob Portman

Two years ago, in Goshen, Ohio, a 16-year old named Jeff Gardner died from a combination of “huffing” gasoline and smoking marijuana. After Jeff’s death, his mother, concerned about a much larger drug problem in the community, called a parent’s meeting at the local high school. No one came.

She later told her story to me, asking how her representative in Congress was going to help address the growing drug problem. It was a fair question, demanding something more than the traditional response.

Members of Congress have a responsibility to represent their constituents in Washington — by legislating, voting, and when appropriate, securing federal funds for state and local concerns. But we must also serve as community leaders at the local level. The escalating crisis of drug abuse is an area where national

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leaders can, and should, display local leadership.

At present, the federal government spends approximately \$17 billion every year on drug control programs operated by more than 50 different federal agencies. Despite these efforts, drug abuse continues to rise dramatically among our youth. Surveys from

the National Center for Addiction and Substance Abuse, the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse, and the Drug Abuse Warning Network Data all show the need for action.

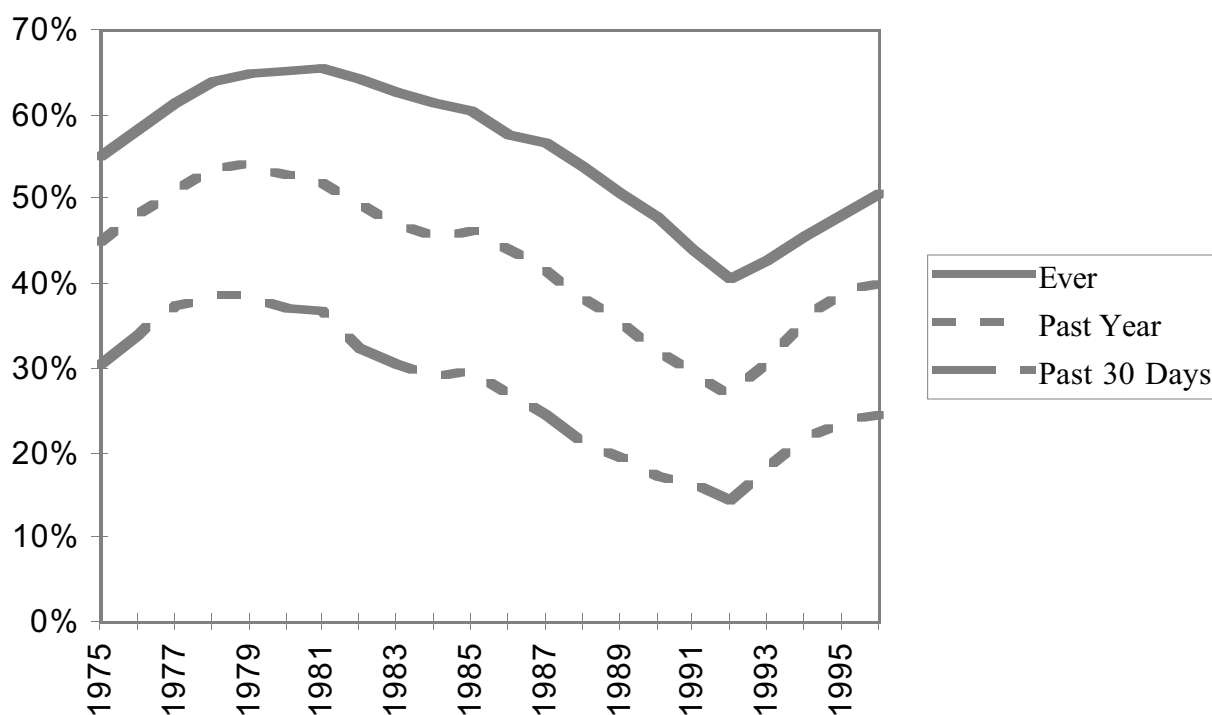
After a decade of progress in the war on drugs, the number of young people using drugs began to increase in 1992 (see graph on page 11), with the sharpest increase found among younger kids. LSD use is now at its highest level since 1975, when it was first measured. Since 1992, the number of children between 12 and 17 using marijuana has nearly doubled.

To put the magnitude of the problem in perspective, in the average class of 25 eighth graders (13- and 14-year olds), five are now using marijuana. Baby-boomer parents who used drugs too often assume that their kids will as well, and they feel powerless to do much about it. And drug abuse is implicated as a root cause in other social problems - violent crime, school dropouts, and domestic violence, to name a few.

Unfortunately, these aren’t just vague national statistics with little relevance back home. For instance, the drug problem in Greater Cincinnati mirrors the startling national numbers. According to a recent survey, 11 percent of junior high and high school students in Southwest Ohio use marijuana frequently — the highest recorded level of usage since the survey began in 1987.

Drug Use by High School Seniors: 1975-1996

Source: Office of National Drug Control Policy



The data shows that, while usage among twelfth graders has leveled off, marijuana use among seventh graders has risen to 16 percent — a dramatic increase since 1995 and consistent with national trends showing that kids are experimenting with marijuana at younger and younger ages. And, unlike the commonly held perception, much of the substance abuse problem occurs in the middle class neighborhoods in the suburbs — not in the tough streets of the inner city.

Why has drug abuse among teenagers risen so dramatically in recent years? Understanding the answer to this question is the first step in waging the war on drugs. According to leading prevention experts, there are two major factors driving the increase in drug use.

First, teenagers are viewing drug use as more socially acceptable. When that happens, drug use rises. Second, young people now view drugs as less dan-

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gerous (for example, not many kids or parents know that marijuana today is often more than 15 times

stronger than it was a generation ago). Again, when that occurs, usage goes up. At the most basic level,

Part of the problem has been the failure in recent years of national leaders to send a clear and consistent message that drug abuse is dangerous and wrong. In this regard, President Clinton has failed to use the bully pulpit of the presidency to help wage the drug war.

the problem boils down to a serious erosion of attitudes among our youth about the acceptability and risks of drug use.

Part of the problem has been the failure in recent

years of national leaders to send a clear and consistent message that drug abuse is dangerous and wrong. In this regard, President Clinton has failed to use the bully pulpit of the presidency to help wage the drug war.

The evidence indicates that national leadership is critical in reducing drug abuse, in part, because such leadership helps generate the media attention that is so critical to mobilizing people in the war on drugs. No one makes this point more authoritatively than Jim Burke, Chairman of the Partnership for a Drug-Free America. It was Burke's group that in the 1980s launched the most extensive and successful public service campaigns in the country. Burke also believes strongly that while the message must emanate from our national leaders and engage the opinion shapers at every level, this issue is most effectively addressed at the local community level.

Jeff Gardner's mother wanted national leadership, but in a manner that would help her in Goshen, Ohio.

Facts about Teenage Drug Abuse

- In 1996, one in four 12th graders (25 percent) reported using illicit drugs in the previous 30 days. Twenty-three percent of 10th graders and 15 percent of 8th graders reported using illicit drugs in the previous 30 days.
- The percentage of students in each grade level reporting illicit drug use increased substantially between 1992 and 1996 – from 14 percent to 25 percent for 12th graders; from 11 percent to 23 percent for 10th graders; and from 7 percent to 15 percent for 8th graders.
- Prior to 1992, illicit drug use by 12th graders had fallen sharply from 30 percent in 1985 to 14 percent in 1992, but then began to rise sharply, reaching 25 percent in 1996.
- Drugs are readily available to anyone who wants to buy them. By historical standards, cocaine and heroin street prices are at their lowest point and purity at its highest, making use of these drugs more feasible and more affordable than ever before.

Source: Office of National Drug Control Policy

Spending more federal dollars on drug control programs was unlikely to directly touch this mother's life. Neither would it encourage other parents in her community to address the drug problem.

Members of Congress are in a unique position to mobilize people in their communities. By the nature of our jobs, we deal with every sector of the districts we represent. We can also bring state and national expertise and resources to bear on a problem. And we can encourage focused media attention, which is often the critical component that helps educate and mobilize neighborhoods to solve their toughest social problems.

Prompted by Jeff Gardner's death and his mother's questions, I've helped initiate a broad new effort - The Coalition for a Drug-Free Greater Cincinnati — to help wage the war on drugs in my community. The Coalition recognizes the limitations of Washington-based solutions and draws on the resources of local citizens. For the first time, community activists already involved in the anti-drug effort have been brought together with key business leaders, religious leaders, the media, parents, youth, law enforcement officials and others to implement a comprehensive, community-based strategy to reduce drug abuse in our region.

We made it clear through the amount of time we devoted to the effort and through an inclusive, non-partisan approach that this was not about re-election campaigns or shallow publicity. The reaction from the community has been very positive. For the first time, every television station, every major radio station, the two daily newspapers and our largest outdoor advertising company are all running anti-drug public service announcements and advertisements. Many of the radio spots highlight a popular local rock band and local sports celebrities. We know that such

messages help reduce drug abuse, and Greater Cincinnati now has one of the most aggressive anti-drug media campaigns in the country.

Messages, though, are not enough. It is also important to proactively take steps to create a clear anti-drug environment.

The data reveals that most people who use drugs go to work every day. And, common sense tells us that work is the best place to reach parents who need to be better educated to deal with teenage drug use. In short, businesses have to be engaged as well.

One of the ideas proposed by a national prevention expert and pushed by the Coalition in Greater Cincinnati was providing incentives for businesses that

For the first time, every television station, every major radio station, the two daily newspapers and our largest outdoor advertising company are all running anti-drug public service announcements and advertisements.

work to combat drug abuse. As a result, one of the largest health care providers in the region and the Ohio Bureau of Workers Compensation will offer, for the first time ever, financial discounts to businesses that adopt certified drug-free workplace programs.

The program makes a lot of sense. Businesses like it because health care and workers compensation coverage costs less. Health care providers and the Bureau like it because drug-free workplace programs result in a healthier workforce and fewer medical and workers compensation claims. Communities like it because it helps keep workers drug free, helps those

who are in trouble get into treatment, and helps educate people about the dangers of drug abuse.

Prevention experts tell us that if parents would simply talk to their kids we could reduce teenage drug abuse by as much as 30 percent. The Coalition also works with the Parents Resource Institute for Drug Education (PRIDE), a premier national parents group, to train parents on the dangers of drug abuse, practical steps they can take to keep their kids drug-

Working with the Coalition, key faith leaders in Cincinnati are now spearheading efforts to communicate anti-drug messages on a regular basis and holding follow-up forums to help educate and mobilize their congregations.

free and what to do if those steps fail.

This training is being replicated in every school district in the region, and parents are signing up in droves. To date, the Coalition has helped train nearly 1,800 parents on what drugs can do to a child, how to communicate effectively with their children and how they can prevent their kids from falling prey to drugs. Parents are taught to get to know the parents of their child's friends and to ensure that there is always a chaperone at a party. We are continuing to build on this momentum, and more than 50 training sessions are scheduled for the coming months.

Another vital cornerstone of the Coalition's effort is involving community religious leaders in the anti-drug effort. Their response has been heartening.

Ministers, priests, rabbis and others have an important role to play in reducing drug abuse. Obviously a clear message from the pulpit that drugs are dangerous and wrong is very beneficial, reaching out directly to kids to warn them about the dangers of drugs.

But the pulpit is only one tool our religious leaders are using to address the problem. Through church forums and other gatherings, they also educate and mobilize their congregations and youth groups to combat drug abuse. As respected members of the community, they can reach outside their congregations. And, as counselors, they can help families and individuals cope with substance abuse. There is also a growing body of evidence that faith-based treatment programs are among the most effective programs available.

Working with the Coalition, key faith leaders in Cincinnati are now spearheading efforts to communicate anti-drug messages on a regular basis and holding follow-up forums to help educate and mobilize their congregations. A number of leaders have agreed to begin incorporating the anti-drug message into their sermons. The Coalition has been able to help by providing them with the latest information and other helpful resources.

We have also established a Speakers' Bureau to supplement the D.A.R.E. program in the schools, and to help get the message out in community centers and student clubs. Through my contacts as a U.S. Representative, I have been able to bring national and state prevention experts to Greater Cincinnati to enhance the local effort. National groups such as the Partnership for a Drug-Free America, Community Anti-Drug Coalitions of America, PRIDE and others have helped. The list of initiatives proposed by the local community, brought to the Coalition by state and national leaders and facilitated by congressional leadership goes on and on.

With an issue such as drug abuse, which diminishes and threatens the lives of so many of our young people, the public rightly expects the federal government to do something about it. And clearly there are important roles for the federal government to play — protecting our borders and interdicting drugs from other countries, strengthening our federal criminal justice system, and providing federal assistance for the best prevention and treatment programs. But the alarming statistics tell us that we need a more creative approach.

Many Members of Congress are beginning to agree that the time for top-down solutions from Washington has passed. More than 70 other Members have established or are supporting similar community coalition efforts in their regions. And, this year, Congress overwhelmingly passed legislation - The Drug-Free Communities Act of 1997 — based on the experiences of the Coalition in Cincinnati.

The Drug-Free Communities Act builds on the proven track record of locally-based coalitions by supporting these communities and encouraging others to become more involved. The new law represents a fundamentally different approach to the fight against illegal drug use, recognizing that a local, community commitment is absolutely essential to solving the drug problem. And, instead of creating new layers of federal bureaucracy, it channels assistance directly into communities that have organized themselves to put in place anti-drug efforts that work.

This legislation, which was signed into law in June, also represents new thinking because federal support will only flow to communities that have first

demonstrated a comprehensive, sustainable, and accountable anti-drug effort. Not one federal dollar will be spent under this program without a dollar or more having first been generated by a local community. And, because it rechannels existing anti-drug resources, it involves no new federal money and won't negatively impact the budget.

Passage of the Drug-Free Communities Act, combined with the direct involvement of Members of Congress in developing and supporting community-based coalitions in their districts, are much more significant steps than cynics might imagine. Although the public has become disenchanted with the federal government's ability to address our worst social problems, there's still an abiding faith in a community's ability to fashion solutions close to the needs of ordinary people. Members of Congress can still be a catalyst. Polls show that, while the public distrusts Congress as a whole, individual Members are generally well respected in their districts.

The point is that Members of Congress can and should inspire citizens to action. There has been much debate recently about the need to revitalize civil society. The Coalition for a Drug-Free Greater Cincinnati is a concrete example of how Members of Congress can do that in a way that actually touches people's lives — not by passing more laws in Washington, but by using their bully pulpits and resources to engage their communities back home.

This is how we, as national leaders, can best exert — and sustain — national leadership over the long haul. And for the sake of the Jeff Gardners in our communities, we'd better get started.

Rep. Rob Portman of Ohio has served in the House since 1993. He is the pioneer behind the Coalition for a Drug-Free Greater Cincinnati and the author of the Drug-Free Communities Act, which was signed into law in June 1997. Any Member of Congress or community leader interested in forming an organization similar to the Coalition for a Drug-Free Greater Cincinnati can contact Rep. Portman's office at (202) 225-3164.

THE MORAL OBLIGATION OF LEGISLATORS

By Rep. Tom Coburn

“When one rules over men righteously, ruling in the fear of God, he dawns on them like the morning light.”

— II Samuel 23: 3-4

In Washington, legislators often disagree about what’s right for the country, but most agree that doing the right thing for the country is our moral obligation. Unfortunately, most Americans believe we are doing a terrible job following through with this most basic obligation.

Thirty years ago, three out of every four Americans trusted the federal government and other institutions. Today, the number has fallen to one in four. The public consensus is clear: Politicians are more concerned about preserving their position than the long-term consequences of their policies. Some politicians are more successful than others at appearing to be true servants, the public believes, but few are motivated by a genuine desire to do the right thing for the country.

We can blame the spread of this acidic cynicism on a variety of familiar culprits: the liberal media, a debased entertainment industry, voter apathy, and presidential scandal. But we are wise to first seek improvement among the group we can most directly affect — ourselves. The Congress has lost the confidence of the public, and it is our duty to do what we can to win it back.

FIGHT THE DISEASE, NOT THE SYMPTOMS

As a physician, my job is to treat and prevent illness. When patients come into my office, I analyze their symptoms and use objective findings to prescribe a treatment for the disease. But for congressmen, the opposite is often true. Instead of treating the ailment itself, politicians tend to address only the outward symptoms.

In medicine and politics, suppressing the symptoms of a disease can create the illusion of curing the affliction. However, attacking the symptoms, some of which are untreatable, can lead to the unintended consequence of making the problem worse, because the disease itself is left untreated.

Federal policies about teenage pregnancy and HIV are two of many examples of how the government treats the symptoms of a disease rather than the cause. “Safe sex” programs, for instance have exacerbated the problems they were designed to combat.

The number of pregnancies among unmarried teenagers has doubled in the last two decades. Of those pregnancies, 40 percent end in abortion. Of

the 3,200 babies I've delivered in my life, roughly half have been to teenage girls.

If you put any group of physicians in a room and ask them what's the absolute best medical advice you can give a young person about sexual activity, 99.9 percent will say do not have intercourse until you are in a married monogamous relationship. Why is our national policy something less than the best medical advice? HIV and unwanted pregnancies are 100 percent preventable by abstinence, with the rare excep-

If a doctor masked symptoms as often as Congress, he or she would be sued for malpractice. But a politician who does the same will likely win reelection. Attacking a problem at its source is often too risky for politicians who desire a long-term career.

tions of a blood transfusion or a pregnancy from a rape.

Condoms and clean needles are instead presented as solid defenses against HIV and unintended pregnancy, which is as sensible as preventing drunk driving with lite beer and anti-lock brakes. The fact of the matter is that most teenage boys and girls don't even remember to brush their teeth at night. Why would they remember to wear a condom or take a birth control pill? The case of convict Nushawn Williams, who intentionally infected 13 teenage girls with HIV in Chautauqua, New York, proves this very point.

Congress has a history of masking symptoms in

many other areas of public policy, especially with respect to the federal budget and welfare policy. This Congress has done much to celebrate budget successes when everyone knows that, in reality, small steps have been taken toward reducing our national debt that could consume the earnings of the next generation of Americans. Congress has done a much better job of combating the root problems of the welfare state.

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DIAGNOSE THE DISEASE BEFORE TREATMENT

Symptoms are always symbolic of a deeper conflict. Doctors must understand the nature of a disease to fight it effectively. The same is true for elected officials.

The problems afflicting America are more moral and spiritual in nature than economic. Our nation is increasingly rejecting a belief in objective moral values in favor of a mushy relativistic world-view, which holds that truth is nothing more than one person's opinion, and that there is no moral authority higher than the individual. In a relativistic world-view there is no objective "right thing for the country." Instead, every person defines the right thing for themselves.

Tolerance is replacing the Judeo-Christian ideal of love of God and neighbor as the national ethic. Tolerance, however, has less to do with unconditional love of the person and more to do with unconditional acceptance of the person's behavior, regardless of how deviant that behavior might be. Words like

deviance, of course, have no resonance in a relative world because what's deviant for me may be desirable to you. Practices like genocide and pedophilia are not wrong in the relativistic world-view. Yet, this world-view persists in our culture despite its logical absurdity.

The loss of values in the culture is the greatest cause of the breakdown of the family, which has given birth to many other social pathologies that have captured the attention of the nation. Children from single parent families are more likely to commit crimes, do drugs and drop out of school, according to numerous studies. This wounded generation has done much to contribute to the 300 percent increase in crime and teenage suicide we have seen in the last 30 years.

Congress should be asking itself what we can do to fight this disease. We can't pass a law that compels husbands to love their families, or children to obey

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their parents. We will never achieve trickle down morality from Washington because the government is a reflection of the heart of the people. However, we can and should raise the level of debate about the true nature of disease afflicting America. We can participate in a sustained campaign of public persua-



"I expect to maintain this contest until successful or until I die, or am conquered, or my term expires, or Congress or the country forsakes me."
—Abraham Lincoln

sion that uses our position as public figures to engage in the battle of ideas.

For instance, we can do more to educate the public about the values and principles that made the country great. The Founding Fathers understood that freedom does not flow from individual rights alone.

"Of all the dispositions and habits that lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle," George Washington said in his farewell address.

A CASE FOR OPTIMISM

The threats to America are grave, but there is reason for optimism. Nations that departed from their original visions have been restored in the past.

The heroic leadership of Abraham Lincoln is the best example in the history of our nation.

During Lincoln's train ride to Washington in 1861 the press labeled him a disgrace to the nation. He had received only 40 percent of the popular vote and had little administrative experience. This backwoods boy from Illinois lacked the necessary intelligence and education to lead the nation through its crisis.

Lincoln, however, was motivated by an unshakable conviction that the Union must be preserved at all costs because God had a magnificent work for America to perform in the world. His resolve was evident early in his administration when he wrote, "I expect to maintain this contest until successful or until I die, or am conquered, or my term expires, or Congress or the country forsakes me."

Lincoln faced a difficult reelection bid in 1864. The Union army had suffered astronomical casualties, averaging 10,000 per month for four years. His opponent, General George B. McClellan, favored a negotiated peace, even if it meant the breakup of the Union and the continuation of slavery, notes Alonzo L. McDonald in his forward to "Abraham Lincoln: The Spiritual Growth of a Public Man."

Lincoln refused to mirror the position of his opponent, won reelection and led the Union to victory. Lincoln faced enormous political pressure throughout his presidency, but he never wavered in his mission. Had he caved into the pressure the results would have been catastrophic for the United States and the world. In the next century, it is doubtful that the U.S. would have been in a position to defeat the Nazi regime and the Soviet's evil empire had our nation been split by the Civil War.

Another equally stunning act of political courage was the campaign to abolish slavery by 19th cen-

tury British parliamentarian William Wilberforce.

It is difficult to appreciate the audaciousness of Wilberforce's challenge in our time. The typical citizen of the British Empire considered slaves to be nothing more than property, and therefore didn't object to the practice by English ship captains of throwing slaves overboard to reduce cargo weight. Wilberforce's challenge also went directly against the economic interest of his own country. Slavery was as entrenched

Today, the greatest temptation facing legislators in our party is to postpone doing the right thing for the country until our position as the majority party is more secure.

in the economy of the British Empire as the defense industry is in our economy. The tentacles of the trade reached into every part of British society.

Wilberforce experienced vicious criticism, two physical assaults and the temptation of personal political ambition in his crusade. One historian noted that the enormously talented Wilberforce could have been prime minister had he "preferred party to mankind." On July 26, 1833, forty-six years after his crusade began and only three days before his death, the House of Commons passed an Emancipation bill that freed all slaves in the British empire.

Neither Lincoln nor Wilberforce ever considered attacking the diseases afflicting their times at anything but their source. They were single-minded in their determination to do the right thing for their countries and were never distracted by political sta-

tus or position. The moral obligation of legislators in this Congress is to do the same.

THE NEED FOR POLITICAL COURAGE

Today, the greatest temptation facing legislators in our party is to postpone doing the right thing for the country until our position as the majority party is more secure. If we make this our practice, with every compromise we will drain the lifeblood from the movement that propelled us into the majority. Our souls will depart from us and we will become the hollow politicians the public expects us to be yet sent us here to replace.

Most legislators come to Congress with the best intentions of doing the right thing for the country, but are too often distracted by the trappings of Washington. The perks of public office invigorate personal ambition, then desire to preserve position leaves a politician vulnerable to the ever-present fear of losing position. Colleagues with brilliant minds and

courageous visions have been paralyzed with the fear of being labeled an extremist. We need more legislators who will rise each morning prepared to make a decision that could end their career.

We can learn from the life of Mother Teresa that power grows when it is given away, not consumed upon one's self. She started her ministry with nothing but her hands, her time, and her heart. She gave away what she had and built a life that was recently

celebrated with an unprecedented state funeral for a Christian in a Hindu nation.

As legislators in the U.S. Congress, we have access to enormous resources. On all occasions,

we should work to ensure that those resources are used to serve the best interests of the people. With firm convictions, a vision for our future, and the courage to weather the storms of criticism, the desire to do the right thing for the country will become a habit, and doing anything less will seem odd and improper – as it should.

**We need more legislators
who will rise each morning
prepared to make a decision
that could end their career.**

Rep. Tom Coburn of Oklahoma, a practicing physician, was first elected to the House in 1994.

The American Sound

The American Sound is a project of Rep. John Boehner of Ohio and Rep. James Talent of Missouri. Its purpose is to propose, promote, and defend innovative and principled solutions to the long-term challenges facing the country, while relying and focusing on traditional American values: freedom, responsibility, faith, opportunity.

John Boehner



John A. Boehner (*"Bay-ner"*), elected to represent the 8th Congressional District of Ohio for a fourth term in 1996, has made it his mission to reform Congress and to make the federal government smaller, more effective, and more accountable to the people it serves.

John's first two terms were marked by an aggressive campaign to clean up the House of Representatives and make it more accountable to the American people. In his freshman year, he and fellow members of the reform organization known as the "Gang of Seven" took on the liberal House establishment and successfully closed the House Bank, uncovered "dine-and-dash" practices at the House Restaurant and exposed drug sales and cozy cash-for-stamps deals at the House Post Office.

John was instrumental in the origin, execution, and successful completion of the House Republicans' *Contract with America* — the bold 100-day agenda for the 104th Congress which nationalized the 1994 elections.

Boehner also serves as Chairman of the House Republican Conference, the fourth highest post in the House Republican leadership.

Born in 1949, John is one of 12 brothers and sisters and a lifelong resident of southwest Ohio. After college, Boehner accepted a job with a struggling sales business in the packaging and plastics industry which he eventually took over and built into a successful enterprise. His gradual foray into politics grew out of that business experience, where he witnessed first-hand big government's increasing chokehold on American business.

John is married to the former Debbie Gunlack and has two daughters, Lindsay and Tricia. They reside in West Chester, Ohio.

James Talent

James M. Talent, 41, is a third-term Republican representing the second district of Missouri. He has a history of fighting for legislation that combats bloated federal bureaucracy and returns power and resources back to the people. He has been a strong proponent of the balanced budget, middle-class tax relief, and term limits for Congress.



Talent has also been a leader in developing sound social policy. In 1994, he introduced the Real Welfare Reform Act, which later became the basis for the welfare bill that was signed into law in 1996. He is also the co-author of the American Community Renewal Act, a bill designed to foster moral and economic renewal in our nation's low-income communities.

Concerned with the readiness and resources of our nation's military, Talent formed an Ad Hoc Committee to the National Security Committee called the Hollow Forces Update Committee in the 103rd Congress. The Committee served to keep Congress appraised of the dangerous effects of President Clinton's defense budget cuts.

Talent is currently the Chairman of the House Small Business Committee. Additionally, Talent has served in numerous leadership capacities, including being named Freshman and Sophomore Class Whip for the 103rd and 104th Congresses. Last Congress, Talent was named Deputy Regional Whip by Majority Whip Tom DeLay and was appointed by the Speaker to co-chair the Task Force on Empowerment and Race Relations and serve on the Republican Task Force on Welfare Reform.

Talent and his wife, Brenda, were married in 1984. They have three children: Michael, Kate, and Christine.